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ABSTRACT

The attitudes of American Asian students at San Francisco State University toward their education were studied. Responses were obtained from 585 students who were enrolled in Asian American Studies classes in spring 1986. Sixty percent of the sample were of Chinese ancestry, 20% were Filipino, and 20% were other Asian (including Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islanders). Findings include: 65% considered the quality of instruction at the university as either excellent or good; about 60% were pleased with the variety of courses and the content; 70% felt their Asian American studies classes were excellent or good; 58% rated the general education program as fair, poor, or very poor; 64% felt advising services were either fair, poor, or very poor; students were critical of career guidance and of the availability of financial aid; and 61% viewed the social, cultural, and recreational activities and facilities at the university as fair, poor, or very poor. Information was also obtained about the family background of the students. Comparisons of the responses of American-born Asian American students, immigrants, and immigrants of less than 9 years were made. (SW)

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ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS: A LOOK AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE

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ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS: a look at San Francisco State
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According to the results of a study conducted by The California State University (CSU) system on student needs, Asian American students are the most dissatisfied with CSU programs and activities. This report entitled, "Student Needs and Priorities Survey (SNAPS) noted that "Instructional quality, advising, and faculty behavior generally elicited particularly negative responses from Asian students." [Footnote 1]

SNAPS reported that Asian American students "...were consistently more critical of institutional programs and practices than students of other ethnic groups. Their relative discontent was both strong and pervasive and was especially pronounced on issues of an academic nature." [Footnote 2] The students generally also noted a wider range of desired campus changes and in a greater degree compared to the other students. For example, Asian Americans further emphasized a need for offering a greater variety of programs and courses and for improving instructional quality. They also indicated a need for support services such as tutoring, career guidance and academic advising. [Footnote 3]

The CSU study specifically encourages in the case of Asian Americans the need for further empirical study into the various factors that may affect student dissatisfaction such as the

influences of cultural values and the family as well as to examine the special needs and expectations among the different Asian groups. The study also suggests for future study a comparison between individual CSU campuses to the system-wide results. [Footnote 4]

Few academic studies, including the SNAPS study, have focused even cursorily on the educational concerns of Asian American collegiate students. Most of these post-secondary education level studies primarily have concentrated on the psycho-socio-cultural attitudes and behaviors of Asian American students. [Footnote 5] A few other studies note the importance of cross-cultural awareness in serving the educational needs of Asian American students at the University of Maryland. [Footnote 6]

On the other hand, the media has generally hyped and sensationalized the educational success story of Asian Americans focusing particularly on Asian immigrant students. [Footnote 7] This pedagogical image as a "model minority" has been soundly refuted by Asian American professors. These scholars maintain that universities have ignored the needs of Asian American college students and further recommend curricular and institutional improvements that are sensitive to their needs. [Footnote 8]

Out of an educational interest and concern for more specific data on Asian American college students, this research study was

conducted. [Footnote 9] Further this study seeks to compare the SNAPS findings to that of a specific CSU campus. San Francisco State University is a large metropolitan institution (spring 1986 enrollment 24,420) with a sizeable Asian American student population (approximately 25%) that is reflective of the diverse Asian American community in the San Francisco Bay Area. [Footnote 10] The Department of Asian American Studies is equally large in enrollment and comprehensive in its course offerings. Furthermore, it is institutionalized within the university on a number of levels. [Footnote 11]

This project replicates parts of the CSU study and seeks to determine whether certain Asian American students share the same degree of institutional dissatisfaction indicated in the SNAPS report. This study focuses on a particular classification of Asian American students, those enrolled in Asian American Studies classes in spring semester 1986 at San Francisco State University. This group was selected for a number of reasons: it represents a sizeable and identifiable sampling population; there is virtually no literature on the perceptions of students taking Asian American Studies classes; and, Asian American Studies, itself, represents a curricular change in and improvement of the institution.

Another researchable issue explored is the extent of cultural and family influences on the educational attitudes of these Asian American students. A final issue examined is the question of institutional bias in the CSU study. The SNAPS study assumed

that Asian immigrants residing in this country nine or more years are identical to the American-born Asians and combined the data of the two categories together. This study does not make this presumption and keeps the two groups distinct.

STUDY DESIGN

Each of the 34 spring 1986 Asian American Studies classes at San Francisco State University were surveyed. The students were asked to fill out a self-administered questionnaire in the classroom with a project staff member present. Out of a total of 1035 students enrolled, the actual total survey population is reduced. Students enrolled in more than one Asian American Studies class were asked to fill out the questionnaire once (165). In addition, students doing independent projects (19) were not polled and non-Asian American students were requested to not participate in the survey (95). Thus, out of an adjusted survey population of 756 students, 585 surveys were completed for a response rate of 77%.

Moreover, based on available data, the surveyed sample appears representative. Information on the respondents reveals that sixty percent of the students are of Chinese ancestry, twenty percent are Filipino and twenty percent are other Asian (including Japanese, Korean, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islanders). These figures correspond favorably to data on the spring 1986 Asian American Studies classes which reveal that 58% are Chinese American, 18% Filipino American, 15% other Asian and

9% non-Asian. Year in school information (with spring 1986 Asian American Studies figures in parenthesis) is freshmen 17% (15%); sophomores 18% (20%); juniors 32% (33%); seniors 32% (31%); graduate students 1% (1%). Female respondents account for 60% (58%) while males are 40% (42%).

No comparative statistical information is available on the percentage of American-born and foreign-born Asians in the spring 1986 classes, but forty percent of the students sampled are American-born. 30% are originally immigrants who have been residing in the United States for nine years or more and 20% are immigrants in America for less than nine years. [Footnote 12] Ninety percent of those surveyed have a permanent address in the San Francisco Bay Area with 68% living in San Francisco, 12% in the East Bay and 10% on the peninsula, south of San Francisco.

RESULTS

The SNAPS study found that Asian American students were highly critical of the general instructional quality in the California State University system. [Footnote 13] However, this study found the opposite with 64% considering the quality of instruction at San Francisco State University as either excellent or good. Unlike SNAPS, students were similarly pleased with the variety of courses offered (61% excellent or good) and the content of courses (60%). Additionally, students in this survey were asked to rate their Asian American Studies classes and 70% found them excellent or good.

While SNAPS revealed that Asian American students were

particularly negative toward faculty behavior, this study did not reveal this among the Asian American sample at SFSU. Rather, the one academic area found wanting in this study is the university's general education program which is rated fair, poor or very poor by 58% of those surveyed.

On the other hand, this survey does support the contention of the SNAPS report that Asian American students are critical of advising services with 64% reporting academic advising at SFSU as either fair, poor or very poor. Students indicated that the two major problems with academic advising are that advisors are unavailable when needed (33% fair, poor, very poor) or that advising activities are not coordinated between advisors, departments and administrative offices on campus (24%). The students were even more critical of career guidance (69% fair, poor, very poor) and personal counseling (70%). The students are also critical of the availability of financial aid (64%) with the American-born the most negative (70%) followed by immigrants here 9 years or more (65%) and immigrants of less than nine years the least critical (49%).

This study also supports SNAPS in the area of social activities as this group is critical of the social, cultural and recreational activities and facilities at San Francisco State (61% fair, poor, very poor). However, males surveyed feel much more positive about the opportunities to make friends and to improve their social life on campus (57% excellent, good) than

females who expressed the opposite (59% fair, poor, very poor).

Unlike the SNAPS study which combined the data from immigrants in the United States nine or more years with the American-born, this study has kept the groups separate and distinct as differences in responses to questions in the survey will demonstrate. In some answers, the American-born and the long-term immigrants are more similar than in comparison to the recent immigrants; yet in other answers, the two immigrant groups are closer, and in still others, all three groups are distinctly different or the same.

EDUCATION

Education has long been revered in Asian cultures and has been seen as a means of assimilation by ethnic minorities into American society. It is also a method of acculturation of immigrants to American values. The study reveals that Asian American students believe that education is still the key to success for people of color in this society (67% agree, strongly agree) but is a sentiment felt much stronger by immigrants (74%) than by the American-born (59%).

A major educational concern for all groups is being able to study efficiently; however, it is more of a concern among the immigrants who have to overcome language and cultural disadvantages. Recent immigrants spend the most time on campus studying (50%) followed by the long-term immigrants (40%) and the American-born (30%) who also have an equal number who spend most of their time between classes relaxing or eating (30%).

In terms of interaction in the classroom, both the American-born and immigrant Asian Americans will usually speak to the professor after class or during office hours, if they do not understand the class material (54% agree, strongly agree), but the two immigrant groups are more similar than the American-born in feeling hesitant to talk to their professors because they are viewed as authority figures (41% to 28%). Recent immigrants prefer to be told the class material rather than have to figure it out for themselves (71%) compared to the American-born or the lengthier-residing immigrants (60%). They also are less willing to take part in class discussions because if they are wrong, they do not want to embarrass themselves in front of the other students (47% to 38%).

The university general education requirements includes a four course basic skills sequence of classes in written and oral communication and in critical and quantitative reasoning. The American-born indicated having the most problems with the math requirement and the least with the composition skill. Immigrants and males found the written and oral communication skills the most difficult while for females, it was the speech and math requirements. Both immigrant and gender groups found critical thinking to be the least difficult requirement.

The SNAPS survey reported that Asian American students were the most willing to transfer to another institution. Among the Asian

Americans in this survey, an overwhelming 75% plan to transfer out, and it was a sentiment most pronounced among the recent immigrants (90%) than among the longer residing immigrants (77%) or the native-born (66%). Over half of those planning to transfer indicate the University of California (51%) followed by another CSU campus (24%). Immigrants in the U.S. less than nine years were the most interested in transferring to the UC system (61%) followed by males (57%), the American-born (51%), females (48%) and immigrants in the U.S. nine or more years (44%). The major reasons selected for transferring are to attend a school or program with more prestige or with a better reputation.

FAMILY

Asian American students believe that their parents expect them to find a job as soon as they graduate from college (65% agree, strongly agree) but indicate that their parents have little influence over their choice of a major (77%). And while all feel strongly that their parents want them to get a job with employment security (71%), it is felt much stronger by the long-term immigrants (80%) than by the American-born or the new immigrants (69%). However, the three groups differ in parental expectations to finish college in four years with the most pressure facing the new immigrants (65%) followed by the "older" immigrants (47%) and the least felt by the native-born (35%). Both immigrant groups feel more responsibility to their parents to do well in school than do the American-born (69% to 53%).

For all groups, parents are the primary source of funding for

their college education (46%), except for recent immigrants who are almost equally dependent on financial aid (41%). Also in general, the students in the survey represented either the first or second generation in their family to attend college (42%, 35%) except among the American-born for which it was the opposite (44% second, 38% first generation).

ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

All three groups feel strongly about being identified as an Asian American as opposed to being just an American (61%). Further, the students believe that Asian Americans have educational problems and needs that should be addressed by the university (60%). Such an institutional response is the offering of Asian American Studies classes. The students overwhelmingly support the contention that Asian American students should take advantage of the unique opportunity at San Francisco State University to learn more about their heritage, culture, behavior and community through Asian American Studies classes (81%). The students, additionally, find Asian American Studies classes are a good place to meet new Asian American friends (60%). Male respondents interact more and speak up more in their Asian American Studies classes than in their other classes (53%) while recent immigrants, and males believe that their Asian American Studies faculty generally understand them better than their non-Asian professors (57%, 52%).

DISCUSSION

Contrary to the SNAPS results, this study reveals that Asian American students enrolled in spring 1986 Asian American Studies classes at San Francisco State University do not rate the academic quality of the institution low. Rather, almost two-thirds of the students rated the quality of instruction at SFSU as excellent or good. SNAPS also reported that Asian American students were the most concerned that the institution offer a greater variety of courses or programs, and again in this area, the students in this survey rated SFSU high. Undoubtedly, included in this concern for curricular variety must be courses on Asian Americans, and students again in this study rated the Asian American Studies program at SFSU extremely high. The Asian American Studies department at SFSU is, additionally, the largest and the most curricularly diverse in the 19 campus CSU system and is also the most institutionalized within its campus with a number of courses satisfying university general education or breadth requirements. Thus, it appears that the institutionalized presence of Asian American Studies courses plays a role in the lack of curricular dissatisfaction among Asian American students at this CSU campus. However, empirical validation of this role is left to further study. [Footnote 14]

Nevertheless, the results indicate that Asian American students feel they should avail themselves of the opportunity to learn more about the Asian American experience. Certain groups of Asian Americans felt better understood by their Asian American Studies faculty and more comfortable in Asian American Studies classes. All the students found their Asian American Studies

classes were good places to meet other Asians. Since studies have indicated that alienation is an important factor in student dissatisfaction with an institution, [Footnote 15] the contrary findings at SFSU compared to SNAPS for Asian Americans would appear to indicate that the presence of Asian American Studies assists in counteracting such feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction.

Further, this study reveals that the high interest in transferring to another institution is not so much based on a dissatisfaction with the present institution as it is based on attending a more prestigious one. Thus, the prevalent choice among students interested in transferring is to the University of California, a better known institution which accepts only the top 12 1/2 % of California high school graduates in comparison to the top 1/3 who are eligible for the CSU system. As one immigrant student stated, she is extremely happy at SFSU, but her parents are pressuring her to transfer to UC-Berkeley because of its reputation. They want to be able to tell others that their daughter graduated from UC-Berkeley.

In Asian cultures, the fact that a daughter or son graduates from a prestigious college reflects extremely favorably on the parents and indicates to others that they did a good job in raising their offspring. Because of this cultural value, parental pressure to do well, to graduate on time and to find a secure employment is felt by Asian American students and is felt most by new

immigrants. Given this pressure and the belief that education is the key to future success, it becomes understandable that Asian American students would be dissatisfied with advisement services. In such a pressure-charged atmosphere, educationally supportive services such as academic advising, career guidance and personal counseling become extremely important assistance sources. In this area, the findings in this study supported the SNAPS study.

This study also upheld the findings of SNAPS in another area of Asian American student dissatisfaction which is in the non-academic activities and facilities (social, cultural and recreational) at San Francisco State. SFSU is geographically small with generally coastal weather. It is a mostly middle-class commuter campus with many students working parttime. Despite its location amidst a large cosmopolitan area, it is over-shadowed by nearby UC-Berkeley and Stanford University. Attempts are being made to improve the visibility of the campus as the "city's university," but its commuter atmosphere inhibits cultural and social venues, and its physical size and weather prohibit recreational developments.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examines the attitudes of certain Asian American students at a specific university towards their education. Further research needs to be conducted which will delve more thoroughly into the specific needs and areas of concerns of Asian American students that are mentioned in this study.

However, a significant finding of this research involves a need to reassess the methodology applied to the study of Asian American students in the CSU system. For that matter, most research on Asian American students incorrectly tends to group them into one generic category. In contrast, an important distinction made in this study is the separating of immigrant data from that of the American-born. While SNAPS rightly separated the figures of recent immigrants, it did not go far enough and unfortunately combined the statistics of the immigrants in the U.S. nine years more with the data on the native-born. While ostensibly innocent appearing, this action is an institutionally prejudicial presumption that an Asian immigrant should be sufficiently assimilated and acculturated after nine years in this country as to be indistinguishable from an American-born Asian. As the data reflect, such an assumption is not only faulty, it is made too often to the detriment of Asian American students.

An example of such a detrimental effect is the often heard statement that Asian American students are good students and have no educational problems or needs. Yet, at SFSU the majority of the students who score the lowest on the English placement examination required of all entering freshmen are Asian American immigrants. [Footnote 16] The university has received funding to intensively remediate the writing skills of such students, but the program is scheduled to be phased out in a year. And still,

the need for this group to develop their basic writing skills will persist.

This study reveals that Asian American students feel very strongly that they have legitimate educational needs and concerns; and most interestingly, this sentiment is felt the strongest among the American-born respondents. Thus, it is among the most assimilated group of Asian Americans, the ones who are the most "Americanized," who feel the strongest about the high quality of Asian American classes and who feel the greatest that Asian American students do have educational needs that should be addressed by the institution. This grouping of Asian Americans have lived all their lives as an ethnic minority in this society and have gone through an educational system devoid of the contributions of Asian Americans to the development of America. Asian American Studies classes fill this intellectual void.

NOTES

1. "A Survey of Student Needs and Priorities in the California State University," The California State University, 1985: 44. The California State University is the largest higher education system in the nation with well over 340,000 students enrolled at nineteen state-wide campuses.
2. SNAPS: 44.
3. SNAPS: 40.
4. SNAPS: 45. 46.
5. A number of articles have been published in the Journal of Counseling Psychology and the Journal of Social Psychology. For example, see Derald W. Sue and Barbara A. Kirk, "Asian Americans: Use of Counseling and Psychiatric Services on a College Campus," Journal of Counseling Psychology 22(1975): 84-86; Dennis Webster and Bruce Fretz, "Asian American, Black, and White College Students' Preferences for Help-Giving Sources," Journal of Counseling Psychology 25(1978): 124-130; G.M. Meredith and C.W. Meredith, "Acculturation and Personality Among Japanese-American College Students in Hawaii," Journal of Social Psychology 68(1966):175-182.
6. See for example, Lydia Minatoya and William Sedlacek, "Another Look at the Melting Pot: Perceptions of Asian-American Undergraduates," Journal of College Student Personnel 22(1981): 328-336; Dennis Webster, William Sedlacek and Javier Miyares, "A Comparison of Problems Perceived by Minority and White University Students," Journal of College Student Personnel 20(1979): 165-170.
7. See for example, "A Formula for Success," Newsweek 103 (1984): 77-78; David Bell, "The Triumph of Asian-Americans," The New Republic 193(1985): 24-31; W.R. Doerner, "To America with Skills," Time 126(1985): 42-44; "Asian-American: A 'Model Minority'," Newsweek 100(1982): 39, 41-42, 51.
8. See for example, Russell Endo, "Asian Americans and Higher Education," Phylon 41(1980): 367-377; Ronald Takaki, "Asian Americans in the University," San Francisco Examiner, April 16, 1984; King Kok Cheung, "Drawing Out the Silent Minority," College Composition and Communication 35(1984): 452-454; Elaine Kim, "English and the Asian American College Student," Education and Urban Society 10(1978): 321-336; "Asian-Americans May Face Backlash at Top Universities," San Francisco Examiner, July 1, 1984.

9. Special thanks to San Francisco State University for funding this study, to Michael Chih Ming Hornbuckle for assisting in the survey and to Dr. Lane Hirabayashi for reviewing the draft.
10. The San Francisco State University, Office of Institutional Research reports in its "Spring 1986 Ethnic Report" that Asian Americans represent 27% of the undergraduate students and 23.5% of the total campus population.
11. Examples of the institutionalization of the Asian American Studies Department within San Francisco State University are the offering of a 24 unit minor degree and the hiring of eight tenured/tenure-track professors. The program also employs eleven faculty lecturers. Additionally, students may take a number of courses in Asian American Studies to satisfy university general education and graduation requirements. The program currently offers 15 courses approved for general education and two courses which fulfill the history and government requirements for graduation.
12. The immigrant designations are used in the SNAPS report and are continued in this study.
13. SNAPS: 23.
14. This study and SNAPS differ in the composition of the testing sample with immigrants in the U.S. less than nine years comprising half of the Asian American students in SNAPS compared to twenty percent for this study. However, this difference in sample population does not account for the discrepancy in the two results as the recent immigrants in this study are satisfied with SFSU curricular offerings as well as with the Asian American Studies Department.
15. Du Mont Schmidt and William Sedlacek, "Variables Related to University Student Satisfaction," Journal of College Student Personnel 13(1972): 233-238.
16. "Request for Campus Implementation Plans for Intensive Learning Programs," (AA 85-10), The California State University, 1985:10.